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Book Review

The Present Personal: Philosophy and the Hidden Face of Language

Hagi Kenaan (2004). *The Present Personal: Philosophy and the Hidden Face of Language*. New York: Columbia University Press.
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by **Archana Barua**

The Present Personal is a book of our time. Written in Israel, *The Present Personal* begins with an honest confession: "Living in Tel Aviv, in Israel, it has been impossible to alleviate the darkness of this period, one during which violence, hatred, intense human suffering together with the growing indifference toward the suffering of others has become the form of daily life" (Kenaan, 2004, p. iii). Despite the darkening situation that "threatens to leave the engagement with humanistic work bereft of any genuine value", *The Present Personal* makes a philosophical attempt to capture the personal at the very heart of the structural at a time when the singular seems either to have disappeared into the propositional, or to have taken flight into a more radical non-propositional *it*.

The opening section, "Philosophy and the Personal", gives a general introduction to the subject matter and the scope of the book in terms of one of its prime motifs, namely, an attempt at thinking philosophically about a situation that philosophy has stopped bothering about, "the problem of prioritizing the language of information in which the individual is irrelevant".

Chapter 1, headed "Language and the Bell Jar" (comprising sub-sections titled "A Picture Held Us Captive", "Language Frame", "The Fact of the Propositional", "This Is How Things Are", and "The Bell Jar"), echoes the central concern of the book: language itself is rooted in those very intimate idiosyncratic moments of our personal life when, if at all, we learn how to "read the face through that sad smile" and how to have a glimpse of the "you who speaks to me in and through what you speak". Can the individual be brought back to language in a genuine way? Is philosophy the right place for the personal? If not, Kenaan wonders, why not?

Philosophy's blindness to the intimate-personal results from its typical way of understanding language and reality and its firm belief that language is a finished product always available for anyone's use, as it remains completely external to the particularity or peculiarity of our intrinsic attachment to our words. The hegemony of the propositional and the factual structure is the only way of structuring our information. Meaning, when divorced from our particularity, is derived from more fundamental meaning structures, that is, from facts that, as Russell puts it, simply "are what they are". "Language and the Bell Jar" also lets us know how the philosophy of language, especially the Anglo-American tradition of philosophy, always censors the personal with its position that the public structure of the language is the ultimate condition of the individual. You feel imprisoned and yet you see no walls around you. Is this the kind of captivity, Kenaan ponders, that Wittgenstein had in mind when he speaks of showing the "fly the way out of the fly-bottle"? The irony is, as Wittgenstein makes us see, that we cannot see it as

a picture. As it loses its touch of that from which it grew, language can return to meet itself only in a very narrow form. And when it returns to the home of language as an outsider, "it can only see what outsiders see [when facing a home]: a picture" (Kenaan, 2004, p. vi). What is thus lost is the actual character of the human possibility of allowing the textuality of language to contain, as Plato has it, the texture of things. In Plato's *Sophist*, for instance, one of the important lessons Theatatus learns from the Eleatic stranger is that language can only convey a logos through a particular intervening of its elements. "It conceals a difference, an invisible difference whose presence explains why when we say such daily things as 'it is raining again', 'I miss you', 'Dinner is ready', 'You are beautiful', we are usually not at all saying that this is how things are" (Kenaan, 2004, p. vi). Kenaan rightly observes: "It locks us in that shifting domain of virtual possibilities that Sylvia Plath, for example, termed the 'bell jar'." Yet, due to the transparency of the bell jar, we are so often tempted to forget our captivity, to forget that the possibility exists for us to escape.

Chapter 2 ("The Limits of Language and the Dream of Transcendence") deals with sub-topics such as "Philosophy and Disappointment", "Language: The Map", "Language and Silence: The Example of Abraham", "The Limits of Language and the Question of Freedom", "Before the Law of Language" and "From Disappointment to Philosophy", and begins with a discussion of Kierkegaard's existential critique of language and the ways in which the propositional structure of language does not allow the spoken words to reflect the singularity of the self. This chapter is a fusion of the traditions of Continental and Anglo-American philosophy, J. L. Austin, Kant, Kierkegaard and Heidegger, as well as literary works by Kafka and Kundera, among others. Wittgenstein, Kierkegaard and Heidegger recognized man's impulse to run up against the limits of language. For Kierkegaard, too, philosophy creates disappointment through the character and form of its language, because of its false appearance as 'contentful'. In *Fear and Trembling*, Kierkegaard takes Abraham as a person who understands an act that is meaningful in a manner transcending language. "To exist under the guidance of pure thought is like travelling in Denmark with the help of a small map of Europe on which Denmark shows no larger than a steel pen-point, aye, it is still more impossible" (Kierkegaard, 1941, p. 55). Even in Kierkegaard, where, because of his Hegelian commitment, the individual becomes problematic, what is ultimately created is the authentic possibility of a paradox. For him, individuality is a project that must be undertaken in spite of language. In Kafka's *Before the Law*, the man from the country never tries to actually enter the gate; instead, he seeks permission from the door keeper, as for him these limits have an absolute value and his desire to enter cannot be realized. Like Kafka's man, Kierkegaard's disappointment with language is a result of having allowed language to determine the horizons of his freedom. He has adopted the structure of language as the structure of his own expectations: that we should also transform this disappointing ode into a joyous one of creativity, and that its limit is the place for language to become creative.

Chapter 3, entitled "Austin's Fireworks", follows five sub-themes – "Austin's Fireworks: The Promise of the Pragmatic Turn", "How to Do Things with Austin", "The Act of Speech", "The Pragmatic and the Personal", "The Mirror at Hand: Afterthoughts" – and is an elucidation not only of "Austin's Fireworks" that illuminated the hidden ground of personal language in our actions and deeds and in actual utterances that depart from a narrow semantic language picture, but it is also an act of re-ordering priorities in which the abstract intelligibility of the cognitive is shown as a derivative mode of interpretation. Surprisingly enough, even in Austin, the question of the personal, of the speaker's singular presence in the things s/he says, is not an issue. Kenaan observes that this is "because Austin is committed to a conception of intelligibility that is essentially public, average and general despite a general shift away from the model of fact depiction. Illocutionary acts are conventional acts of shared meaning. Shared performatory acts between speakers and hearers stem from interaction between structurally identical linguistic agents, between members of a linguistic community for whom sharing a Life World means having an equivalent standing within a uniform, homogeneous domain of intelligibility" (Kenaan, 2004, p. 21). Thus the speech act utterances constituting the propositional core in turn give meaning to the speech act.

Chapter 4 ("Personal Objects"), which deals with "Heidegger (Before) and (After) Austin", "Heidegger's Pragmatic Interpretation of the Ordinary", "The Prison of the Ordinary", "The Aesthetic Elision of the Personal", "Van Gogh's Shoes" and "Sabina's Hat", is a comparison of two other attempts to subvert the "hegemony of content": the poetic path of Heidegger who insists that "Truth is never gathered from objects that are present and ordinary" (Heidegger, 1975, p. 35), and the literary path of Kundera whose novels in particular unveil the hidden authentic person at the very heart of the ordinary provided that one has 'eyes to see' and 'ears to listen' to the way living language breathes. The

ordinary is not a positive manifestation of Da-sein's being-in-the-world. For Kundera, and also for Kenaan, in order to encounter the personal we need to learn to recognize the singularity of existence in a pair of shoes or in a hat. We need to listen to the poetic voice of the ordinary, to see how the ordinary is poetic.

Chapter 5, entitled "Language Unframed: Beauty as Model", which incorporates sections such as "It's Funny", "Aesthetic Judgment", "The Language of Taste" and "The Phenomenality of Your Words", fuses phenomenology and aesthetics by turning to Kant and discovering an analogy between the experience of meaning in language and the aesthetic experience of encountering beauty. Kenaan interprets Kant's attention to the particularity of the aesthetic as a gesture of resistance to the uniformity of the propositional.

Under the rubric "Personal Time", Chapter 6, which comprises "The Time Is Past", "Time and the Language of Possibility", "Time Prefaced", "Perhaps Present" and "In My End is My Beginning", ponders deeply the nuanced dimensions of time, from both a quantitative and a qualitative perspective. Usually time, for us, is available as a commodity of some sort: it is ours on condition that we make proper use of it or we miss it, lose it; we possess time by consuming it. In such a language, however, we not only remain strangers to the "invisible progress", to cite Bergson, "of the past growing into the future", but, furthermore, Kenaan laments, we erase the essential uniqueness of our personal involvement in "the unfolding of our time as a lifetime – the singular life that is yours, hers or mine". Kenaan needs an alternate time-frame to the propositional one that can do justice to "time prefaced", to see that the language of the "Preface" has a peculiar temporal constitution, the way the Preface to any text is just an in-betweenness in which there is a merger of two distinct horizons of time: the clock time and the public reading of time as opposed to the time that is intimate and personal. Kenaan makes an effort at understanding Wittgenstein in his relation to the "present-personal", by locating his words within the context of four other philosophical prefaces in which a philosopher thematizes his work in relation to the pending horizons of time. All these philosophers, from Descartes to Kant, from Heidegger to Quine and then to Wittgenstein, have combined these two distinct horizons of time in their "Preface-Time"; authentically or inauthentically, the journey toward authenticity, and toward unveiling the mask of the personal over and above the structural, continues. Kenaan waits patiently to unmask the hidden face of language, so that the personal voice of the philosopher can still be heard – if we allow it to be heard!

With this magnifying glass at his disposal, Kenaan remains receptive to the concrete dimension of meaning, of language and of time, that is disclosed in the process. What, Kenaan wonders, is striking in these very words of Descartes's prelude to the *Mediations* (1642)? What does it say about man's relation to time? Descartes lets us know: "I realized that it was necessary, once in the course of my life, to demolish everything completely and start again right from the foundations if I wanted to establish anything at all in the sciences that was stable and likely to last. But the task looked an enormous one, and I began to wait until I should reach a mature enough age to ensure that no subsequent time of life would be more suitable for tackling such inquiries. This led me to put the project off for so long that I would now be to blame if by pondering over it any further I wasted the time still left for carrying it out" (Descartes, 1990, p. 212). Immanuel Kant's preface to the *Critique of Judgment* (1783) has its own personal touch, being a project undertaken despite 'time running out of hand'. Kant gives the final finishing touch to his own work, at the same time constrained by the limited time-resources that he has in hand. Kant is in a hurry to give the book its final shape: "With this then I conclude my entire critical enterprise, I shall proceed without delay to the doctrinal one, in order to snatch from my advancing years what time may yet be somewhat favourable to the task" (Kant, 1987, pp.7-8). In Kenaan's reading, both Descartes and Kant attend to their philosophical project with a clear understanding that time is running out. Doing philosophy in the face of finitude, Descartes speaks from the 'now' of the philosophy project, that he cannot delay it any more: the work has to begin at some point in time. Kant looks at the same project from the perspective of its completion: he looks forward to its proper ending. For both, the horizon of time is still open, but neither can take for granted that it will continue to be open for long. Time is what runs out.

In the preface to the seventh edition of *Being and Time* (1953), Martin Heidegger writes: "While the previous editions have borne the designation 'First Half', this has now been deleted. After a quarter of a century, the second half could no longer be added unless the first were to be presented anew. Yet, the road it has taken remains even today a necessary one, if our Da-sein is to be stirred by the question of Being" (Heidegger, 1971, p. xvii). The crux of Heidegger's preface is an announcement of a change, of a 'turning point', "in relation to the work he had written a quarter of a century before", Kenaan observes. After this prolonged time gap, nothing new

could be done. Once time was past, it was futile for him to pursue the initial objective of his project. W. V. O. Quine's preface to the Second Edition of the *Pursuit of Truth* (1992) brings the abstract and the spatial dimension of time to the forefront. For Quine, "time can become meaningful only in the form of an abstract, public, and entirely homogeneous scale, in which a sequence of uniformly vacant moments are always waiting – and always in the same manner – to be used up and filled in with contents". We are informed about his engagement with time in the Preface: "In May 1990, a mere four months after this book first appeared, I was in the gallant little Republic of San Marino for a week-long international colloquium on my philosophy. Six months later I was in mediaeval Gerona, in Catalonia, giving the Joseph Ferrater Mora Lectures – fifteen hours of them and five of discussion. The busy months of preparation and the stimulating exchanges on these occasions sparked thoughts that would have made for a better book if the chronology had been inverted. I am approximating such an inversion as best as I can by this early revised edition" (Quine, 1992).

Kenaan has rightly observed that, in Quine's assessment of time, "all points on the time axis appear to have the same logical status, they are denied any differences crucial to the way we experience time, between the kinds of events that past, present and future have in our lives. With this kind of alignment of time with space, time here becomes space-like. 'Tense gives way to 'now', then, before t, at t, after t, 'I will not do it again' becomes, 'I will not do it after now', 'do' being taken tenselessly and the future force of will translated into a phase after now. " Quine thus represents time in a manner that has no trace of the flowing character of time. While Quine's spatial language can represent "any desired duration and any desired position along the time axis, it completely obliterates any sign of duration itself, or of what Bergson calls durée", Kenaan continues. This is the background that needs another version of 'lived time' to that encountered in Wittgenstein's frustrating efforts at concrete and existential representation of time, the version needed being of a dimension of time that is lived intimately and personally. In this context only, Wittgenstein speaks of a different kind of 'impossibility' that is not directly tied to the fact that a person's life must ultimately come to an end. When Wittgenstein writes in the preface of his *Philosophical Investigations*, "I should have liked to produce a good book. This has not come about, but the time is past in which I could improve it" (Wittgenstein, 1984, p. 48), what does Wittgenstein mean by "time"? Kenaan concludes: "In 'time is past' Wittgenstein here speaks of an impossibility whose internal form is the form of his entangled relationship with lived time, a relationship of which the language of the universal clock leaves no trace" (Kenaan, 2004, p. 61). That the impossible version of it could not have been written any more is the tension in these two senses of understanding time. Wittgenstein speaks of a person who has once claimed his future – a future that, in the flow of time, has become empty, a once pregnant time now turned barren. This tension between the private and the public sense of time, and the fact that an open possibility withers and falls into an abstract reservoir of biographical counterfactuals, is an ordering part of possibility once opened to us which now has lost its potentiality: 'now it is too late for that'. When we speak of a possibility no longer open to us, we return to time as a frame of reference, implying that the time frame available to us is not sufficient.

There is the philosophical pre-saying that comes before philosophy speaks. Since the language of the personal is one that refuses to be a part of the global order of the thinkable, the presence of the personal may be easier to detect by focusing on the prefatory language we find in the preface. Not much interested in the time frame still available to him, Wittgenstein is more concerned with the actual passing of time within this time frame, the way time makes its presence felt, the way time is allowed to appear as a mere lacuna, but a meaningful one at that. Wittgenstein's pronouncement of a concrete limit to his writing is his bewilderment at the presence of a concrete impossibility that has become an important part of his life and yet bears no logical necessity and cannot be inferred from facts of his own biography. Kenaan observes that "This impossibility does not stem from that fact or another but grows out of the temporal unfolding of his existence, his being in time, the story of a life" (p. 63). In time past, Wittgenstein speaks of an impossibility whose internal form is the form of his entangled relationship with lived time, a relationship of which the language of the universal clock leaves no trace. "I should have liked to produce a good book. This has not come about, but the time is past in which I could improve". For Wittgenstein, the passing of time connotes a personal failure. However, whereas Wittgenstein finds himself captured by time, the weight of time constitutes no burden for Heidegger, whose personal preface is, like his philosophical work, entirely future oriented. In the Epilogue, Kenaan reiterates this claim: "to listen to the personal is to be open to the resonance of an irresolvable tension in a person's language". This is a tension between the public uniformity of a person's words and the utterly private roots these words have in our life world. Calling for a phenomenology of the tension between the individual and her language, Kenaan writes: "It is in this tension that the personal

is present. This tension is where the personal lives" (p. 182).

We have undertaken our journey toward this uncharted destination following Kenaan till the end. With Kenaan, we have made our way through the opening of Descartes's *Mediations*, the preface to Kant's *Third Critique*, the preface to Heidegger's seventh edition of *Being and Time* and Quine's preface to the second edition of the *Pursuit of Truth*, and then again through what Wittgenstein writes in the preface of his *Philosophical Investigations*. Was it a worthwhile journey? Has Hagi Kenaan succeeded in tapping the hidden and very fragile voice of the personal in the midst of the structural? Perhaps it is left for us to decide. By juxtapositioning the personal and the routine horizons of their time, Kenaan has prepared the stage for a direct encounter between us, the readers, and them, our favourite authors and the model thinkers, and in this intimate mode of sharing one another we could have a glimpse of the 'they who speak to us' in and through 'what they speak', both intimately and professionally, because that is the way they present themselves to us! Hagi Kenaan has successfully played the role of a mediator and a guide. It is no exaggeration if we say that, in one magical stroke, Kenaan's re-conceptualization of philosophy's approach to language could free the contingent singularity of language while at the same time permitting it to continue to dwell within the confines of content. Hagi Kenaan has achieved his goal in making them – 'they who speak to us' – present, and they, in their turn, have mesmerized us by the sheer force of their presence.

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